

Covert Capital: Landscapes of Denial and the Making of US Empire in the Suburbs of Northern Virginia

Andrew Friedman (University of California Press, 2013), 416 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Social and cultural approaches have a lot of potential for expanding our understanding of intelligence history. In general, intelligence histories are written from the top down, focusing on organizational development, the relationships of political leaders with their services, biographies of service chiefs and other significant figures, or major cases and episodes. These can give some idea of what it is like to work in intelligence, but even the best of these books provide only a limited sense of the experience, leaving unexamined the inner life of a service and its relationship—both at the personal and institutional levels—with surrounding environments. Looking at this would be especially interesting for the CIA, given its sometimes uncomfortable place in American society. Haverford College historian Andrew Friedman seeks to accomplish precisely this in his unusual contribution to the study of intelligence culture, *Covert Capital*.

Anyone planning to read *Covert Capital* should be aware of two points, however. The first is that Friedman's work is overtly political, descending from revisionist histories of US expansionism and imperialism; he sees US behavior abroad, especially since 1945, not only as imperialist, but as resting on a foundation of racism, state criminality, and repression and violence on a global scale. Unfortunately, this is a simple view, with no subtleties or sense of the deeply-rooted contradictions in American foreign policy, let alone an appreciation for the difficulties of real-world diplomacy. Instead, Friedman inhabits a simple, black-and-white moral universe, where the CIA is the US government's main tool for carrying out its oppressive policies. How much a reader agrees or disagrees with this point of view will do much to shape their reaction to *Covert Capital*.

Potential readers also need to be prepared to wade through three hundred pages of horrendous writing. Friedman is one of those authors who believe that any point worth making is worth repeating three or four times. In doing so, moreover, he employs tedious postmodern academic jargon to find and explain profound significance in the most mundane aspects of life. This leads him to build complex paragraphs out of long, convoluted sentences, and one can open the book to virtually any page to find something like this:

Turning toward rather than away from these complexities can narrate anti-racist social histories of suburban and imperial migration and movement that do not merely recast suburbia as the implicit and natural ground for an apolitical, everyday middle-class life, and do not merely recast empire as something that always happens somewhere else, inflicted by system onto no one, and, as such, having no insistent and tortured echoes in the cul-de-sacs of everyday spatial and domestic American life at the lived scale. (219)

One wonders, to put it in postmodern terms, if Friedman intentionally set out to subvert his text by making it unreadable.

Nonetheless, anyone willing (and able) to go the distance will find *Covert Capital* an interesting experience. It is an uneven book, at once captivating, informative, and thought provoking, but also infuriating, simplistic, and disappointing. Most surprising, given Friedman's terrible prose, it is rarely dull.



The core of Friedman's argument is that, while Washington is the overt capital of the United States, the Dulles

corridor west of the city is the "covert capital of the U.S. empire." (19) It is in this area, stretching from Alexan-

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dria to Dulles Airport and bounded on the north by the Potomac River and on the south by Route 236, that the “seemingly natural privacy afforded by the suburbs lent itself to the secrecy beneficial to both the U.S. government and suburban life,” making Northern Virginia the “central management point and habitat for U.S. imperial planning and residence for more than half a century.” (3) The CIA, Friedman believes, provides the best vehicle for examining the covert capital. The agency took the leading role implementing US imperial policy abroad while, in Northern Virginia, its “culture seeped from its headquarters” to shape the Dulles corridor’s political, physical, and socio-economic development. (9)

Friedman is at his best as a storyteller, narrating the physical development of Northern Virginia. The first chapter, in which he recounts the decision to build the CIA’s headquarters in McLean, is the high point of the book. CIA Director Allen Dulles chose McLean, Friedman tells us, in large part because his sister, Eleanor, already had moved the social life of Washington’s foreign policy elite to her home on Spring Hill Rd. There, her parties offered senior intelligence officials and policymakers opportunities to mingle informally and enabled Allen, in a socially comfortable environment, to influence policy away from the openness of traditional Washington. a

Placing the CIA headquarters nearby served several purposes. Most important, it not only enabled Dulles to locate the Agency in a familiar place but, as an imposing physical presence, the new headquarters made a clear statement that the CIA would be a permanent part of the US government. Moreover, because the headquarters compound was known to the public, the building symbolized the open, nonthreatening role of intelligence in a democracy. At the same time, however, the building was hidden in the woods behind Virginia Route 123, shrouded in a “veil of...secrecy” that hid what was going on inside. (47) Therefore, it also was a “powerful model for the disavowal of U.S. imperialism,” which Friedman says makes the complex a “landscape of denial.” (47)

Subsequent chapters have equally interesting accounts of how other aspects of Northern Virginia’s development are connected to the CIA. Most of us driving down Route 193 have noticed Saigon Road but do not know that the wooded acreage around it was developed by Mark Merrell, one of the first US officials to serve in Vietnam. It then became a popular neighborhood for CIA officers

returning from tours in Southeast Asia. Friedman also provides brief accounts of the private lives of CIA officers and their families as they populated the new suburbs of Northern Virginia. In so doing, he reminds us that CIA staff played a role not only in developing McLean, but also new towns like Reston, and they became leaders in local politics and culture.

Similarly, few of us remember, or ever knew, that the noted science fiction author James Tiptree, Jr., actually was Alice Sheldon, herself both a CIA employee and the wife of senior agency officer. Her turn to writing, Friedman notes, was a reaction to the strict male-dominated hierarchies of the 1950s that limited opportunities for women in the CIA, as well as in society in general. In her books, “oppressed people, often women,” meet powerful aliens who “express [their] power through violence.” (119, 121) This, according to Friedman, elevated Tiptree/Sheldon’s works above the usual level of stories that CIA families normally tell about themselves, making them “crucial covert capital texts.” (118)

Friedman also has a lot to say about connections between the Agency, Vietnam, and Northern Virginia. As CIA officers traveled back and forth between Saigon and their homes in McLean, says Friedman, they developed a sense of “twinning transnational domesticity, forged through U.S. empire,” that created an “intimacy between Vietnam and Virginia.” (158, 160) This led some CIA officers to try to shape Northern Virginia politics as they had South Vietnam’s, and also to engage in real estate speculation and development in both places as a single, continuous part of US imperialism.

Nor did this process stop, Friedman points out, with the end of the US involvement in Vietnam in 1975. He tells of the development of Eden Center at Seven Corners, and how it became central to the Vietnamese refugee community in Virginia, many of whose members had worked with the CIA before the collapse of the Saigon government. American and South Vietnamese flags fly at the entrance, and “Vietnamese intimates of U.S. empire in Vietnam crafted in the controlled space of the strip mall a testament to the intimacy and lost geography of Saigon right on the front lawn of their former collaborators.” (193–94)

The CIA’s shaping of Northern Virginia is not just an artifact of the agency’s arrival in McLean and the Vietnam years, however. Friedman describes a second phase, in the

1980s, driven by the arrival of the CIA's Iranian partners fleeing the revolution and the rise of private contractors. It was then, he notes, that CIA contractors—both well-known corporations, such as MITRE and BDM, and small companies started by agency veterans—shaped the landscape around the area as they put up buildings “defined by their repetitious bands of opaque glass” and secure vaults, especially at Tysons. (220) Reagan-era covert action was run from there, with a “businesslike corporate veneer” that went “hand in hand with a new longing for the masculine thrill” of cowboy-like adventures in Central America that recreated the excitement of the Vietnam years but, ultimately, led to the Iran-Contra debacle. (235–36)

Unfortunately, Friedman's storytelling is better than his analysis. Because his version of the history of the growth of Northern Virginia focuses almost exclusively on CIA, he falls victim to tunnel vision, investing small details with great significance. As a result, Friedman's stories form only a weak foundation for the analytic edifice he tries to build. The biblical quote carved into the lobby of the Original Headquarters Building, Friedman tells us, “incorporated the promise of truth into the lobby and suggest[ed] that going deeper into the complex would fulfill that truth...the quote and the lobby instilled a longing to access that truth.” (69) Aside from the pretentiousness of this statement, one wonders how many Agency employees know what the quote is or, given the lobby's inconvenient location relative to parking and most destinations in the building, even see it more than once in a great while. As for the office buildings around Tysons, their architecture—regrettably, to be sure—is no different than what may be found in any suburban office park elsewhere in the country. They seem to be less a reflection of aggressive imperialism than of corporate architects' lack of imagination.

Another problem with *Covert Capital* is that, in examining the CIA's role in Northern Virginia, Friedman fails to consider what impact other players might have had. If

the CIA played a large role in US imperialism, then so did many other actors, and they also had important parts in shaping Northern Virginia's landscape and culture. The Defense Department, for example, was physically present at the Pentagon almost two decades before the CIA came to McLean, and the hundreds of thousands of DoD military and civilian employees who have passed through its doors likely have done more to shape the region, whether in war or peace, than the much smaller CIA. (The CIA may have been vital to the growth of Tysons, but would there be a Crystal City without the Pentagon?) Friedman's examination of how the CIA shaped Northern Virginia further suggests that looking at how the National Security Agency—an organization with a headquarters complex at Ft. Meade, Maryland, far larger than the CIA's—and its contractors have affected Columbia, Jessup, and the Baltimore-Washington corridor to the north of the city might also be a worthwhile exercise.

A final problem for Friedman is the dynamism of Northern Virginia. Even if we accept Friedman's point that CIA had an outsized influence when it arrived in what was a rural, conservative, segregated area, Northern Virginia today is vastly different. By the 1980s, the latter part of the period Friedman considers, Northern Virginia had begun to transform into a center of high technology, international corporate headquarters, and higher education that reliably votes Democratic. In this context, and particularly since the end of the Cold War, the CIA's influence has vastly declined.

In sum, had Friedman not focused relentlessly on the CIA, he might have produced a more nuanced, richer work. Certainly, in the right hands, the cultural intersection of the CIA, other government agencies, and the development of Northern Virginia could be terrific history. *Covert Capital* is worth reading to see one possible way to look at this story, but it is far from the last word on the topic.

